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ABSTRACT

In Glasgow, Scotland (September, 1954), children massed in a graveyard to hunt for a vampire with iron teeth said to have slain and eaten "two wee boys." This incident was linked to a campaign for stricter censorship of children's reading, especially so-called "horror comics." While evidence connecting the vampire hunt and horror comics was neither found nor sought, evidence exists for an alternative source of the children's concept of a monster with iron teeth. Like parents in a number of countries, Glasgow parents used the idea of a "Jenny with the Iron Teeth" to threaten children who misbehaved at bed time. Research reveals that the Vampire Hunt of 1954 was one of a series of similar incidents taking place in Western Scotland over half a century before and since that date. If such hunts are indeed relatively common, explanations may not be hard to find. The vampire hunt and another incident involving an attack by schoolchildren on gypsies appeared inexplicable to contemporary observers because certain features of childhood were overlooked. The best hope of understanding such incidents is to relate the children's behavior to their past histories and immediate circumstances. Such an inquiry seems possible without recourse to concepts such as "play" and "delinquency." (RH)

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THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF PLAY

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THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF PLAY

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This paper is one of a number in which the authors examine some of the assumptions made when the work and play of children are discussed (Cornwell and Hobbs, 1984, Cornwell and Hobbs 1985, Hobbs and Cornwell, in press). In the others, the emphasis is on the implicit assumptions of psychologists. We have sought to draw attention to the influence of certain cultural norms and intellectual biases. However, psychologists are not unique in being subject to such influences. Lay debates on psychological aspects of work and play are also coloured in these ways. In this paper, we seek to demonstrate the existence of unacknowledged assumptions about play, even where the subject under explicit discussion is not "play" itself.

We shall illustrate our case by reference to two incidents which took place in the same city, Glasgow, in the same month, September, 1954. Extracts from the first contemporary press reports will outline the two events.

On 24 September 1954, The Bulletin carried on its front page a story headed "Police Had To Clear 'Vampire' Hunters":

> HOUSEHOLDERS in Caledonia Road, Glasgow, phoned the police last night to complain of the clamour raised by hundreds of children swarming into the Southern Necropolis to track down and slay a "vampire with iron teeth".
>
> The "vampire", according to the children, was credited with killing and eating "two wee boys". The hunt began shortly after school hours, when grown-ups first noticed a steady trek towards the cemetery. The children climbed the walls and scoured the grounds in the search for the "vampire".
>
> Then their excited shouts and screams became so loud that normal conversation was impossible.
>
> Phone calls of protest were made to Lawnmoor Street police office ... As darkness fell the hunt tapered off and was finally called off by the rain.

Exactly a week later, on 1 October 1954, the Scottish Daily Express, on its front page carried a story headed "Just WHAT has come over our KIDS?":

> For six hours yesterday hundreds of yelling school children attacked a gipsy caravan parked on waste ground at Royston

> Road, Glasgow - for no apparent reason. The police who eventually broke up the riot were mystified about how it started ... Traffic was held up yesterday while the children - aged between three and 19 - swarmed round the caravan and stoned the occupants ... Inside, 29 year old Daniel Rooney and his wife Mary tried to shield their five children from the stones. But one stone hit a pot of water on the tiny stove. The water cascaded over the pram in which five-months old baby Margaret Rooney lay crying. The thick blanket saved her from being scalded.

Although newspaper reports must be handled with caution, our researches have produced no evidence which casts doubt on the general accuracy of these accounts of the events. The incidents have a number of features in common: (a) they involved hundreds of children in relatively concerted action for a number of hours; (b) observer were sufficiently concerned by the children's behaviour for the police to become involved, though no arrests were apparently made; (c) no immediately obvious cause of the children's behaviour was apparent to observers or contemporary commentators. There is also one clear difference between the incidents. In the one case, the children did not find the object of their interest, presumably because it was entirely mythical in character. In the other, the objects of their interest were unfortuantely all too available. The travelling family, if not seriously injured, were subjected to intimidation and danger of injury. For this reason, it seems clear to us that the attack on the "Gypsies" was the more worthy of serious concern. However, the "Gypsy" incident is the one which has fallen into obscurity; we came upon it by accident whilst researching for a paper on the "Vampire" incident. By contrast, the "Vampire" story was the subject of widespread interest. In an interview, the reporter who wrote the first account has told us that he received cuttings on it from around the world. It has been mentioned in several books and articles right up to the present time (see Barker, 1984, Hobbs and Cornwell, 1985).

In one sense, the reason for this prominence is not difficult to explain. There was already in existence in Britain at the time a campaign for stricter censorship of children's reading, a campaign which was paralleled in other countries. The main focus of the campaign was on so-called "horror comics". Although no mention was made of comics in the original press report, newspaper items on succeeding days emphasised the link between horror comics

and the vampire hunt. The link was at first suggested rather than stated baldly, but a week after that first report, a Scottish religious newspaper, the Catholic Observer, 1st October 1954, started its front page lead by treating the link as established fact:

> "Two Glasgow catholics ... have launched an attack against lurid sensational American comics of the type which this week threw children ... into a panic of fear of a vampire with iron teeth that killed two wee boys."

Soon afterwards, it began to be mentioned regularly as "evidence" for the harmful effects of comics. That indeed was how it was treated in the British House of Commons, where it played a part in the passing of an Act of Parliament, Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act (Hansard, 1955).

However, its status as evidence is highly dubious. No attempt was made to check on the reading habits of children who participated in the vampire hunt, and although contemporary horror comics do contain various monsters and other frightening figures, no one has identified one which contained a "vampire with iron teeth". Barker (1984) in his study of the campaign argues that because of the broad ideological base of the anti-comics movement - communists, christians, right-wing newspapers - it was necessary for participants to deal in vague, moral terms rather than specifics. Hence, the lack of detailed support for the supposed link was not necessarily a disadvantage, from the campaigners' point of view.

In contrast with the lack of evidence for a link between the vampire hunt and horror comics, there is evidence for an alternative source for the children's concept of a monster "with iron teeth". We have discussed this evidence in another paper (Hobbs and Cornwell, 1985) and will simply summarize it here. Parents in a number of countries have used a frightening figure with iron teeth to threaten children into good behaviour. For example, in the Jura mountains on the French-Swiss border, there was "Tante Arie", in Yorkshire, England, "Tom Dockin" and in Banffshire, Scotland, a "mermaid with iron teeth" in a dangerous patch of water. Most relevant to Glasgow children was "Jenny with the Iron Teeth" used to threaten children who misbehaved at bed time. This last figure was the subject of a popular poem reprinted in the early part of the century in anthologies for use in school. There is evidence that in the early nineteenth century "Jenny with the Iron Teeth" was the name attached

to the resident of a house near the cemetery where the vampire hunt took place, and that later in the century the specific "Jenny" became more vaguely thought of as an "ogre" or "monster". Thus a folk tradition with a clear local base seems a much stronger potential influence than unspecified horror comics.

Although this may account for the object of the hunt, what of the hunt itself? Here, the apparent inability of contemporary commentators to account for the children's behaviour seems to stem from their ignoring, or being unaware of, some aspects of children's play. Our investigations, for which we make no claims to comprehensiveness, have uncovered a number of other incidents involving hunts. The Vampire Hunt of 1954 can be seen as only one out of a series of similar incidents taking place before and since. Table 1 outlines the hunts reported to us by informants, plus one recent press account. Statements made about location were precise, but we do not place too much reliance on the estimates made of the numbers involved. Although all the cases are from the West of Scotland, we doubt whether they are restricted to that region.

Table 1 "HUNTS" BY CHILDREN

DATE	PLACE	SCALE	OBJECT	SOURCES
early 1930s	Glasgow	"huge number"	Banshee	Letter
1934/6?	Glasgow	100-150 2-3 nights	White Lady	Interview
1935/6?	Glasgow	100s	Spring-heeled Jack	Interview
1938?	Glasgow	1,000s; several nights	Spring-heeled Jack	Interview
1954	Glasgow	100s; 2 successive nights	Vampire with Iron teeth	various
1960?	Paisley	c100; successive nights	Maniac	Interview
1969/70?	Paisley	Bands of c.10; one afternoon	Miniman	Interview
1985	Kilmarnock	More than 100; several nights	Grey Lady (ghost)	Evening Times (13/3/85)

If such hunts are indeed relatively common, explanations need not be hard to find. Children's responses to the unfamiliar may be a mixture of fear and curiosity. Behaviour may vary depending on which is for the moment the stronger, as in Harlow's (1959) infant rhesus monkeys alternating between exploring the unfamiliar objects in the environment and clinging to the surrogate mother. There may too be links between hunts and mass psychogenic illness (Colligan et al. 1982)

We would suggest then that the Vampire and Gypsy incidents both appeared inexplicable to contemporary observers because certain features of childhood were overlooked. Threatening figures are routinely used by adults as part of their repertoire of verbal social control (Widdowson, 1977). Such figures give rise not only to fear in children but also curiosity. In a group or crowd setting, the tendency to following their curiosity is strengthed at the expense of their fear. When searching for a mythical, and hence unobtainable, "vampire" no aggression appears in the crowd, the "gypsies" were unfortunate enough to provide a target for aggressiveness, which also may be strengthened by membership of a crowd. We would further suggest that none of these notions is unique to psychologists, but they were not used by contemporary observers because the use of threatening figures in childhood socialization is a matter on which many adults may be ambivalent, and hence reticent. If that is indeed the case, then "horror comics" were to some a welcome alternative source for the frightening object. "Vampires" may more readily be attributed to horror comics than "gypsies".

The question arises of whether either or both of these incidents could usefully be classified in one of the common descriptive categories such as "play" or "delinquency". There is a case for saying that the involvement of the police indicates that "delinquency" was an implicit contemporary category. Whether that was appropriate seems problematic in the case of the vampire hunt since there are no reports of injury or damage. Following the recent paper by Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) we see no need to treat "delinquency" and "play" as mutually exclusive categories. Both incidents have some at least of the features sometimes identified with play. They <u>appear</u> spontaneous and they <u>appear</u> voluntary for example. Yet, again following Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne, these do not appear particularly sound indicators of playful, as opposed to non-playful, activity. It might be safer to make the more cautious judgement that the incidents have some features in common with types of activity sometimes regarded as play.

Whether it is necessary, or indeed helpful, to decide whether either incident is or is not "play" or "delinquency" is another matter. We have not claimed to offer a full "explanation" of these incidents but we argue that the best hope of understanding them is to relate the children's behaviour to their past histories and immediate circumstances. In the terminology of interbehavioural psychology, we have sought to illuminate the behaviour by exploring the participants' possible reactional biographies and settings (Pronko, 1980). This exploration seems possible without recourse to concepts such as "play" and "delinquency". Are these terms at present anything other than modes of value judgement; children's "play" refers to activities of which we approve, "delinquency" to activities of which we disapprove? As terms referring to human social behaviour do they not have a "political" rather than a "scientific" standing?

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